

I D E A S

I N

RELATION TO PRAYER,

ORIGINAL AND SELECTED.

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## IDEAS IN RELATION TO PRAYER.

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"IN the opening scene of his great poetical master-piece, Goethe, the Shakespeare of Germany, represents Faust, his hero, alone in his high arched gothic study on the night before Easter. While the moonlight streams through the painted window-panes, and falls on books, manuscripts, instruments, glasses, boxes, and all the dumb companions of a scholar's solitude, Faust sits uneasily at his desk,—master of philosophy and law, medicine and theology, and all the sciences, yet restless as a caged eagle.

With mingled pride and contempt, he runs through the list of his acquirements and honors, and avows to himself what the most learned men always know the best, that human knowledge, compared with human ignorance, is as nothing. Having lived a life of thought, absorbed in pursuits remote from

common interests, he recoils by a natural reaction from his hermit-like seclusion, and burns for something better; he is sick of poring over his parchments, and declares his life empty of joy. Hence he has betaken himself to the study of magic; that he may by the aid of spirits dive beneath the surface of things and deal henceforth with realities,—with something better than mere words. A profound spiritual restlessness, a secret, “mysterious pain torments him,” which he tries to account for by saying that he has surrounded himself with skeletons and dead men’s bones, instead of the living Nature in the midst of which God created man.

Thus musing with himself, Faust takes up a book of magical incantations, written by the hand of the great Nostradamus, turns over the pages, and, at last pronouncing a potent spell, summons before him the mighty Earth-Spirit, which appears in a flame of crimson fire. Faust turns away in terror, unable to bear the sight; but when taunted by the Spirit as a “cowardly, wriggling worm,” he rallies his pride and exclaims: “Shall I yield to thee, thou fiery Form? It is I, Faust, thine equal!”

"Thou art equal," is the disdainful answer, "to that spirit which thou comprehendest—not to Me!" With this the awful vision vanishes. "Not equal to thee!" echoes Faust: "to whom, then? I, the image of God, not equal to thee!"

At this moment, a knock at the door breaks the spell; Wagner, Faust's pupil, enters to bore his master with an untimely call, and can scarcely be got rid of by a broad hint that his company is distasteful at so late an hour. Wagner retires, but Faust has lost the golden moment. A profound disgust with his human weakness floods his mind. "Though I had power to evoke thee," he cries, "yet to retain thee had I no power!" From the dizzy heights of spiritual exaltation, he falls to the dead level of common life. A flask of poison, a sleep-potion of deadly and most subtle powers, catches his eye; he grasps it. From its case he draws forth a crystal goblet which his ancestors had used in by-gone days at high festivals, passing it from hand to hand, and obliging each guest in turn to describe in rhyme the quaint figures carved upon its surface. "To no neighbor," he says, "will I

pass thee now: I will not practice my wit upon thy curious art. Here is a juice that soon inebriates. Be this last draught of mine, with all my soul, a salutation to the Morn!" He raises the goblet to his lips; but at this moment, on the stillness of the midnight air, strikes the deep bell of a neighboring convent, and from a chorus of angelic voices bursts forth a rejoicing anthem, welcoming the advent of Easter.

With a thrill Faust hearkens to the sound; a flood of tender memories rushes into his soul and sweeps away his purpose. "I hear your message, heavenly tones!" he exclaims, "though faith is lacking. Miracle is faith's darling child. And yet, familiar to my childhood's ear, your music calls me back to life. Once fell, in the solemn stillness of the Sabbath eve, the kiss of heavenly love upon my brow. Then, full of presage, sounded the deep-toned bell; and a prayer was rapturous joy. With all the feelings of my childhood, memory holds me back from the last step. O, sound again, ye sweet songs of heaven! The tear gushes forth—Earth has me again!"

That tear, brought to the eye of Faust by the sacred memories of childhood—his mother's kiss of love, his own childish devotions exhaled from a pure and innocent heart like fragrance from a flower—that tear, I say, was a *prayer*. It was the revival, at least for one high moment, of divine aspirations,—the fresh pulsation of a world-sick heart with new tides of purer blood,—the sweetening of a close and stifling atmosphere by fresh gales from the meadows and fields,—the breathing of a better spirit, albeit for a brief interval, into a soul that had not yet lost all love for goodness and for truth. There is little to admire in the character which Goethe has painted in Faust, except this momentary susceptibility to better impulses. He is selfish and unprincipled, and goes on, notwithstanding his rescue from self-destruction by a sudden influx of better thoughts, to sell his soul to the devil and play the part of a most consummate villain. I am not sure but that his vileness looks doubly black, when set thus strikingly in contrast with divine instincts; yet this superiority to the thraldom of the lower nature is in itself lovely, and only fails to command our perfect admiration because it is so fleeting. Eternize

this moment, and it becomes a heaven. Shall we despise the better moments of bad men, and scorn their transient goodness, because they so speedily turn again to wallow in the mire? Not even the best of us can afford to do this. It is true of us all—"we cannot keep the heights that we can win." However evanescent may be the soul's beauty, however quickly it is clouded and smutched with evil, there is cause to lament the swift passing away of its loveliness, but no cause to sneer at its brief appearance. Nor is it just, either to the vicious or to human nature itself, to suspect all such flashes of light from a dark character as mere optical illusions, as mere tricks of hypocrisy. Beneath all foulness and deformity of soul, there is even in the worst something sound, healthful and beautiful, as a gold coin, however overlaid with dirt, is still gold at the heart. Hence the momentary outgush of tender feeling from the selfish heart of Faust; the brief melting of its ice under the warm breath of holy remembrances is as pure an illustration of the nature of true prayer, as if the ice of selfishness had not again encrusted his spirit with adamantine hardness.

Taken in its essence, prayer is something deeper than words. Words are but one of many forms in which true prayer may find expression; nor has everything that passes for prayer a right to bear the name. Volubility of tongue is commonly in the inverse ratio to prayerfulness of spirit. When the soul prays best the lips are sealed. A torrent of words poured forth with pious whine, shouted or screamed, perhaps, at the top of the voice, is too often the soul's ostentatious proclamation of its own prayerlessness. Deep feeling is no master of rhetoric. I would rather listen to the rumbling of cart-wheels over stone pavements, than to a rhetorical prayer. The one is honest, the other is dishonest noise. It was once said of a distinguished man that "he offered the most eloquent prayer ever addressed to a Boston audience." Was ever sarcasm more biting? Such prayers are a travesty on worship. Let us learn that prayer is something other and better than ambition for human praise; something too sacred to be lumped in with morning and evening chores; something too ethereal and free to be reduced to a daily or weekly duty. He has never yet learned to pray aright who

knows no prayer but that of words or mechanical routines.

What, then, is the essence of living prayer? I will not pretend precisely to define what must ever elude all definition; prayer, like love, must be experienced to be understood, and once experienced, it cannot be cut and dried in a formula. Yet it may be inadequately described. True prayer is the soul's deep homage to goodness and beauty, and truth,—the profound thirst for divine life, its thrill of reverential worship before Infinite and Eternal Being, its deep self-indentification with the One and All. It is the unutterable repose of the tired spirit in the boundless and living Whole, the ending of ignorant struggle against the Omnipresent Power that fills infinitude with itself, and holds us all in the bosom of changeless law. It is not extinction of the private will, in hopeless submission to a Fate whose right is its might, but rather the glad identification of the private will with the deepest currents of the universe, its conscious and active trust in the higher thoughts and higher ways of the universal Mind. It is the mighty Gravitation of the soul to its Source, the strong attraction of its love for the Supreme

Loveliness, its joyous flight above the clouds into the serenest radiance of the empyrean. What is it *not*, that is deep, real, vital, in man's experience? It is earnestness; it is courage; it is truthfulness; it is purity; it is principle; it is love; it is the uplifting of the heart to God, and self-dedication to all that is God-like. It is the outflashing of the inner light into the outward life. It is the supreme experience that makes an oasis in the desert of desolate years.

The spirit of prayer is thus the Soul of Nature breathing through the soul of man. Wherever it lives and moves, it as inevitably creates some form of self-expression as a gushing spring creates for itself a channel. But its forms of expression are as diverse as the faces and the characters of men. It would be as idle as presumptuous to prescribe one and the same form to all. Let each heart utter its own life in its own way. Everything is a prayer, a true and genuine prayer, that *expresses* an inward endeavor and longing for diviner character. It may utter itself without words in the heightened color of the cheek, in the quick suffusing of the eye, in the unconscious bowing of the head, in the swifter throbbing of the

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heart, in the escape of a contrite sigh, in the electric thrill of the nerves at the sight of beauty or goodness; all these, and countless others, may be prayers, more full, more complete than the blended supplications of a mighty multitude.

“ Prayer is the soul’s sincere desire,  
    Unuttered or expressed;  
The motion of a hidden fire  
    That trembles in the breast.

“ Prayer is the burden of a sigh ;  
    The falling of a tear;  
The upward glancing of an eye,  
    When none but God is near.

“ Prayer is the spirit of our God  
    Returning whence it came;  
Love is the sacred fire within,  
    And prayer the rising flame.”

There is no need to shout through a speaking trumpet to reach the ear of God; neither is He captivated by the elegance of our diction, or the grace of our elocution. The worded prayer is not so audible to Him as the aspiration, the inward glow of yearning for something better, which is too deep for words. Many a

man and many a woman pray daily who never utter a syllable in prayer. Perhaps they are no believers in verbal worship; perhaps they shrink from a mode of expression not natural to them; perhaps they cannot find words to speak. Some men are too religious to pray with words. They have been shocked or repelled by the grovelling prayers of pulpитеers, and in the stillness of their own souls worship God with more expressive silence. There cannot be one law to all; each must be a law to himself, and interpret for himself the deep promptings of his own nature. It is as natural for one man to pray with words, as it is for his neighbor to offer God the inarticulate adoration of musing thought.

I find two kinds of bigots in this matter. One kind says:—"You must pray regularly at morning and night, go to church, attend prayer meetings, and let your voice be heard." The other says:—"You must never pray at all anywhere." The one says:—"If you do not pray as I prescribe, you are an infidel." The other says:—"If you do pray at all you are a hypocrite or a fool!" Friends, let the bigots have it all to themselves; let us practise a large wisdom, and judge no man. The *sub-*

*stance* of prayer,—the desire for virtue, the aspiration, the sense of inviolable law, the inward veneration of the Perfect and Ideal Good, cannot be dispensed with by him who would be a whole man; but how each soul shall utter these in life and action, it is neither for you nor me to declare. A serene, joyous, faithful, reverent spirit should most certainly hallow the heart of every man; but whether he should pray with words, every man must settle for himself. For myself I cannot think it useless to express verbally, when the mood inclines, the deep worship of the soul. The expression of a true feeling deepens the feeling itself. The same feeling which prompts us all to express our affection in Christmas gifts, prompts some of us at times to express our affection towards the infinitely Good in simple words. God needs no gift, even of words, at our hands; but, if you are a father or mother, was it nothing that you received a useless trifle from your own child? Even if it was nothing to *you*, did it not make the heart of your little one swell with happiness, to offer you some token of love? Perhaps we too are no more than children. Are there no times when it would be violence to our own instincts to with-

hold from them the luxury of words? When I am told, as I have been told, that all prayer is foolishness and superstition, I feel that he who tells me this, has not sounded all the depths of the human heart, nor scaled all its heights. When you forbid all birds to sing, the thrush and the nightingale will disobey.

I have called it presumptuous to prescribe one and the same form of expression to all who pray. This I must modify. There is one form of expression binding on every soul. No soul can rightly pray, whose life is not a prayer. We may or may not, at our option, put our devotion to God and goodness into words; but alas for us, if we fail to put it into deeds! If we can but worship God with heroic and divine character, let us not mourn our awkwardness of speech or untunefulness of voice; let us be content. If we can but express our thirst for purity in spotless souls, our thirst for truthfulness in stern integrity, and crystalline sincerity of conduct, our thirst for all beneficence in deeds of service done to humanity's poor neglected ones, then King David, with all the music of his matchless lyre, never sang to God so sweet a Psalm. Spend your Sundays where

and how you will—read your Bibles as much or as little as you please—believe this, or disbelieve that, as the laws of thought and the degree of your culture shall determine; but if you make your daily life the expression of an endless striving after all that is high and pure, brave and tender and unselfish,—why friend, though all the world should hoot and pelt you with shouts of “infidel, infidel,” God be thanked for the sweet beauty of your worship! Dare to be a man, though in the midst of puppets; trample all deceits and expediencies and time-servings and meannesses and impurities under foot; shine in the fogs of the world’s selfishness like a beacon-light of simple fidelity to divine laws; and depend upon it, this prayer put into life and character, is itself its own answer from God. Under this law do we all stand, that we shall pray all the days of our lives, with hands and feet and head and heart and all we have or are. The really prayerless man is he who gets down and besmears himself with the mud of licentiousness, drunkenness, and all evil passions; or he who prays morn, noon, and night, to the great god of greenbacks, and burns up honesty and humanity on his altars; or he who, in any way, dedicates himself to aught

save manliness and godliness—which are one and the same. To cherish a transparent purpose that shuns not strict inspection, and with grave yet cheerful assiduity to change it into fitting action day by day, is to have the essence of all religions, the substance of all prayers. From the obligation to worship the Eternal with such devotion no soul is exempt. Thus to pray is but to fulfil life's highest end.

Here then, we find the radical idea of prayer, the concentration of all true spiritual worship, in the soul's fidelity to all goodness, in its hunger and thirst after righteousness, in its passion for diviner life and deep joy in the living God. However it may utter itself, whether with or without voice, this uplifting of the heart to the Absolute Best is the fountain of noble living and high character; and prayer truly conceived, means each and every expression of this inward self-consecration. Words are but casual outcroppings of this interior purpose and affection, and are by no means essential to genuine religion. Truly to pray is to be conscious of a deep devotion to the ideal and perfect Good; is to put this inward devotion into some sincere expression. The one prayer incumbent on all

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is to live nobly; beyond this there is no obligation.

Yet I count it as a mark of spiritual misdevelopment or at least undevelopment when no outgush of heart-worship ever clothes itself in words,—when no inward jubilee or profound yearning ever seeks relief in direct speech to the omnipresent and indwelling One. Whether I were commanded or forbidden to pray in words, the two grievances would be equal; the vocal prayer is mockery if it be not spontaneous and free, and if it be spontaneous and free it will not be repressed.

In what remains to say, I shall use the word prayer in its narrower sense, namely, verbal or worded prayer.

There are many kinds of prayer, good and bad, foolish and wise, true and false. I know no prayer more beautiful than that of the Mohammedan,—“Thou art all that I desire, O thou Perfect One! Make me to Thee all that Thou desirest!” To listen to the petitions poured out by some preachers, one would imagine that prayer is nothing but a bare-faced beggary. Selfishness and folly are none

the less displeasing, because flaunted in the face of God. On the contrary, the folly is more sickening, and the selfishness is more hideous when set in immediate contrast with the perfect Wisdom and perfect Goodness. If a man has no better business than to be everlastingly "saving his soul," when not his soul but his common sense, is in danger, I have nothing to say; but this I see, that selfish prayer is a highly immoral act. It is bad enough to beg exemption from eternal fires as the supreme good; this has its partial excuse in fright and the instinct of self-preservation. But when men pray for rain, or good crops, or success in this or that scheme, or prosperity in business, or some other worldly advantage which depends on natural laws,—when they beseech Christ to intercede for them and save them from hell,—it seems as if they fancied that private schemes could be pushed through in Heaven, as they are in Congress, by lobbying and log-rolling. Men are degraded and demoralized by such prayers. Why should they always pray in Christ's name, or for Christ's sake? If we pray, let us pray in our own name. An excess of abasement and want of self-respect is implied in this selfish endeavor

to obtain from God's partiality towards Jesus what cannot be obtained from His impartial goodness. In fact, the clamoring for favors not conferred by universal laws which are equal and just to all alike, is mischievous and debasing. If prayer is nothing but beggary, nothing but a selfish plea for private ends, it is just as immoral as any other species of selfishness. Let us see things in their true light. Meanness is not ennobled by being thrust into the face of Heaven. The noble spirit will seek from God no good that will not include his race. It would be ashamed to be singled out as the recipient of partial benefits; it would blush even to ask that just and universal laws should be warped for a favorite's advantage. It prefers to cast in its lot with all humanity, sure that the Author of humanity has but one law for all.

But this selfish begging, this pious mendicancy, grows partly out of ignorance. The changelessness of law is henceforth a fixed principle. If prayer is the effort or even the wish to suspend or overrule or in any way affect natural laws, then it is at the same time useless and irreligious, useless because the laws

of God change not;—irreligious, because it is religion to obey these laws without seeking to change them. To conform our wills with the absolute Order; to trust so unreservedly in the absolute Goodness, that we have nothing to ask—this appears to me to be the highest worship. Bishop Dupanloup of Paris, declared that “prayer sometimes equals and surpasses the power of God! It triumphs over His will, his wrath, His justice.” What idiotcy is this? If prayer is only an effort to revolutionize the government of Infinite *Intelligence*, it aims to supplant this by the government of Infinite *Folly*; and we could not then too soon forget to pray. That God is God, should be a thought to hush forever all wild and foolish wishes. He wisely prays who with delight acknowledges the perfectness of Nature, and, though it be with tears, rejoices in its unchanging laws.

True prayer, therefore, is neither an attempt to enlist Omnipotence in the service of our little private jobs, nor an attempt to undermine the foundations of the universe by overthrowing the changelessness of its laws. Were it either of these, it would be infinitely childish and ridiculous, as pulpit prayers too often

are. But true prayer, gushing spontaneously from a full heart, is the simple outbreathing of a peaceful and reverential spirit. Even the joy of nature is a prayer. The sea prays in the splendid sparkle and everlasting dash of its waters. The earth prays in the uplifting of its mountain peaks like worshipping hands. The stars of night pray with radiant eyelids forever trembling, as if to repress tears of adoring joy. The universe is everywhere at prayer laying on the altar, the thank-offering of its own beauty and peace. Shall the soul of man alone be mute, and pour forth no song of thanksgiving and delight? Like the birds in spring, it must utter itself in music. Prayer is the song of an innocent, trusting and loving heart; and while birds sing and hearts love, so long will they pour forth their joy and praise, each after its kind.

“Farewell, farewell! but this I tell  
To thee, thou Wedding Guest,  
He prayeth well who loveth well  
Both man and bird and beast.  
He prayeth best who loveth best  
All things, both great and small,  
For the dear God who loveth us,  
He made and loveth all.”

Whoever comes to perceive that God acts always by law, and never by caprice,—that the sphere of law includes alike the worlds of matter and of mind,—and that this vast system of laws, material and spiritual, which we are wont to express under the name of Nature, is the produce of perfect Intelligence and Goodness,—whoever I say, has come to perceive these great truths, can cherish no expectation, or even wish to alter by verbal requests, the changeless order of the universe. For him, prayer as *petition* means nothing but the revolt of human will, against the wise and beneficent system of Nature. But as the spontaneous and unforced expression of the sentiments of awe, reverence, aspiration, gratitude, and spiritual unity with God, prayer can never be outgrown, until these sentiments are themselves outgrown. It is the natural voicing of the noblest part of human nature, and if not subjected to unnatural constraint, the soul will always in its profoundest experiences seek to relieve itself by some outbreathing of its inward worship.

True prayer is the free and spontaneous utterance of an over-charged heart, it can

never be reduced to rules, or bound by routine. Resolve to pray regularly at set times, at morning or night, or at any other fixed season, and prayer will be converted into a dead and hurtful form. Freedom is all essential to the spirit of prayer. The prayer which utters only the greed of human selfishness under pretence of worshipping God, is a mockery of all things sacred. You cannot hire a priest to do your praying. If you cannot do your own praying, it remains undone, though a hundred voices chant the "*Miserere Domine!*" in your behalf. It does no good to listen to the sweetest or divinest outpouring of devotion, unless the incense rises in your own soul. Worship is at first hand or not at all. Each soul must live its own real life."

We have already said that God's good gifts are only to be obtained on the terms prescribed at the creation—terms which are never modified or altered, to suit the pleasure or supposed necessity of any one individual, or of all mankind combined. Even if the whole human family should at the same instant, pray most devoutly for the slightest change in God's original ordinances or purposes toward mankind, none could take place. The rain cannot

be made to fall, because man prays for it. The pestilence cannot be removed by supplication to God, but by conformity to those physical laws, the breach of which produced the pestilence.

If God is perfect in knowledge, any attempt of priest-craft to dictate to Him, by means of prayer, what He should do, is pitiable ignorance or gross blasphemy. Jesus, himself, says, "Your Father knoweth what things ye have need of before ye ask Him." God's laws are all-sufficient, and man's only business is to understand and obey them.

How is it then, that men should continue to ask God to perform miracles, or acts of special providence in their favor, and sometimes on very frivolous pretexts. Did any man ever have proof positive that any prayer was answered? Events sometimes happen seemingly at the instance of prayer; but it is impossible to be assured, beyond the possibility of mistake, that the event in question would not have taken place, entirely independent of any prayer.

It may be asked, how God's goodness is to benefit man, if he is to be subjected and amenable to inflexible laws, which no prayer can mitigate or turn aside. The answer is easy.

God organized and incorporated in man's system or nature, from the first, such qualities, faculties and functions, as were necessary to fit him for being the medium and dispenser of God's blessings to himself and to his fellows. God placed within him conscience—"the voice of God"—the innate sense of right and wrong. He gave him also his reason and reflective faculties, together with instincts and intuitions, all of which point and lead to a belief in the immortality of the soul. All these, and others of a similar character, enable him to thread his way among the unchangeable and eternal laws of God, with a success which answers God's purpose, in relation to his existence here and hereafter, and ought to secure thankfulness from him for the glorious bestowal of such a boon. He has been endowed, too, with such faculties as enable him, if he will, to understand the rationale of God's laws, whenever he studies them, and to recognize the harmony with which they all co-operate to work out a divine purpose, and should act upon the knowledge, that God's favors and gifts can only be had by conforming to the conditions prescribed for all that live.

The man who asks God to stimulate him to worship and obedience by supernatural means, or who asks Him for health, or wealth, or length of life, or any other especial grace or favor, acts in effect as if God had been unmindful of him, and had not provided for his needs, and thereby virtually accuses his Maker of ignorance or neglect. It is important to the highest worship of God, that man should have full faith that God originally provided for whatever is needful for him, so that he may understand that if he fail to enjoy these provisions on the terms primarily prescribed by God, it is through his own mistake or neglect, and not God's—as man's irrational prayer—as petition would imply.

Prayer is not worship; and the only worship that can be acceptable to God, consists in obedience to His divine and beneficial laws, and in thankfulness and gratitude for the gifts so lavishly showered upon us.

The religion, which the spiritual necessities of mankind require, finds its only foundation in the teachings of God to all men, and is aptly illustrated in the precepts and pure teachings of Jesus—when disengaged from Judaism and all the Mosaic mythology—to wit: adoration

of God, and love and duty to man. This is the one true religion established in the hearts, consciences, and souls of all men from the beginning, which ever has been, and ever will be sufficient to the end, that through God's wisdom, goodness, and justice, the existence of each member of the human family shall result in the glorification of the Creator, and the happiness of His creatures—be the path travelled ever so tortuous or rough.

The doctrine taught by God from the beginning, and which is ever being echoed and reechoed in the souls of all men—that He is infinite in goodness as in all things, and that man's highest duty is to cultivate the sublime germ of love to God and man within himself, so that its legitimate fruits may be produced by contributing, as far as it is consistent with his duty to himself, to the happiness and well-being of all God's creatures.